

Boston University

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November 29, 1985

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Dear Colleagues:

As you might imagine, I read your letter of November 25 with great interest and care.

You should know that I, too, would support "a journalism education program for Afghan journalists which would take place at the University, which would observe the normal standards and requirements for all international students attending the College of Communication, and which would take into account the historic tragedy now engulfing the Afghan nation because of the Soviet invasion." After spending considerable time informing myself on this issue, however, I concluded: a) that those who require the training contemplated by the USIA differ in cultural, professional and educational background from the "normal . . . international students" with whom we deal; and b) that a program conducted in Boston is an option which is not at present open to us.

The question, then, was not whether you or I might prefer a program conducted here, but whether a program conducted in Peshawar was feasible and in the interests of Boston University. In the course of informing myself about this matter, I had considered all of the putative objections that appeared in your letter. I shall respond to them seriatim:

"A program conducted in Peshawar could not be satisfactorily administered . . ." You provide no evidence for this assertion, so it is difficult to know precisely the nature of your concerns. I would point out, however, that Boston University has successfully administered a large number of programs in the Third World in recent years, and consequently the techniques of procuring supplies, disbursing and

accounting for funds, securing housing for on-site personnel, etc. are matters with which we have had considerable experience. Boston University programs, both large and small, have operated successfully in Sub-Saharan Africa, the Middle East, Central and South America, South Asia, Southeast Asia, and Southern Europe. Such programs are not without their difficulties, but the difficulties are hardly insuperable.

Moreover, the best evidence that I can find suggests that your characterization of Peshawar as a refugee center rife with "turmoil" and "swash with secret agents, rival political factions, and intense emotions" is greatly overstated. The U. S. State Department's only advisory for Americans traveling to Pakistan is that the country suffers from a shortage of hotel rooms! Both John Koehler, who was in Peshawar within the last three months, and Rosanne Klass, who has spent a large portion of her adult life in Afghanistan and who has also visited Peshawar recently, have stated that the city is, in their opinion, safer for Americans than Boston. Thus, I did not find the administrative objection at all weighty—certainly not persuasive enough to suggest that developing a proposal would be a waste of time.

"A program conducted in Peshawar . . . would be open to infiltration and surveillance by agents of the KGB, the Iranian government, and other governments hostile to the United States . . ." If this is in fact an objection to the program, I utterly fail to understand its force. Many Boston University programs, whether they take place here in Massachusetts, in the Third World, or elsewhere, are "open to infiltration and surveillance" by hostile intelligence agencies. In practice, many have certainly been surveilled and some may even have been infiltrated. This is a fact of life in the contemporary world, and if it constitutes a serious objection at all, then it is an objection against every program operated by Boston University—including the ones in which you teach. Your argument is in fact an argument for doing nothing, anywhere, at any time, and plays into the hands of those who hope that they can, by intimidation, hinder the rational pursuit of truth and the free flow of information. It is ironic, I think, that a group of journalists should adopt such a position.

"A program conducted in Peshawar . . . would pose serious risks to the reputation of the University and the College" and, moreover, "[t]he gravest risk is that the program would be seen by the outside world and by the American academic community as not an educational enterprise at all, but as a venture in propaganda and counterintelligence." Let me first state that it is no part of the mission of Boston University to engage either in propaganda or in counterintelligence. After careful study of the project, however, I found no evidence whatsoever to suggest that this project is in any way tainted by either. If you have such evidence, then you ought to adduce it.

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To the contrary, however, the funds for the project were voted by Congress on the recommendation of a bipartisan Congressional Task Force, and the purposes for which they are to be spent are publicly stated, highly specific and indisputably educational.

I do not doubt that it is in the interest of "the KGB, the Iranian government, and other governments hostile to the United States" to paint any attempt to increase the flow of accurate information from Afghanistan to the rest of the world as "a venture in propaganda and counterintelligence." But I cannot believe that the rest of "the outside world" or "the American academic community" would initiate or believe such disinformation. Even if they did, however, it would not constitute an objection to Boston University's participation in the program. I believe that I am as concerned for the reputation of this University as anyone; but that reputation, if it is to be worth protecting, must be based upon our commitment to the ideals of free exchange of ideas and free flow of information. To turn down a project that offered some hope of furthering those ideals because some might misunderstand or distort what we are about would be to undermine everything for which a university ought to stand. I believe that individuals or institutions which refuse to risk their reputation in a good cause do not deserve a good reputation.

I fully agree with you that "before Afghanistan was attacked in 1979, it did not have a strong independent press with professional standards and traditions." I also agree that "such a press cannot be swiftly created under ideal conditions." But surely these are arguments for being realistic in our expectations rather than for doing nothing. Very little of importance can be done swiftly, even "under ideal conditions." That does not mean, however, that nothing can or should be done. I found it quite surprising that a group of people who profess journalism and who therefore might be expected to know something about how the world works would embrace arguments that make the best the enemy of the good. I find it hard to believe that this represents careful and mature reflection based upon a serious attempt to inform yourselves about the guidelines for the project and the real situation in Peshawar.

For their information, I have read your letter to Dean Redmont and to others who are concerned in this matter. Because you suggested that President Silber be asked to "take up this matter at the highest levels with the director of the United States Information Agency and with the White House," I naturally provided him immediately with a copy of your letter. I believe it is President Silber's view, as it certainly is mine, that to attempt to convince the USIA to alter the project guidelines on the basis of such insubstantial arguments would risk losing any credibility the University might have with the USIA. The approach that was actually adopted at the President's suggestion offers the only reasonable hope of having your position adopted—and that hope is in my view at best tenuous.

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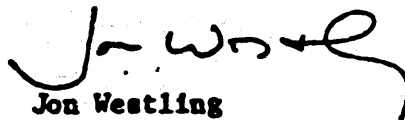
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As you know, the University is now developing a proposal that will contain alternative approaches to the questions at issue: one approach will argue for a program here in Boston, another will respond to USIA's guidelines more directly. I hope that the USIA will accept one of these approaches, because it is my opinion that the future of the College of Communication will depend, in no small measure, on a more successful effort than in the past to attract external support for educational, research and training activities that the College needs to enrich its academic program and advance its reputation.

I am grateful for your interest in this matter and trust that it signals an increased interest among the faculty of the College of Communication in grant and contract activity.

Yours sincerely,



Jon Westling

JW/ng

cc: President Silber  
Dean Redmont  
Associate Dean Goldman